

# Government and employers attack striking apparel workers in Bangladesh

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The Bangladesh government and the country's garment industry employers are continuing a joint assault on apparel workers who have been involved in major strikes and protests for higher wages and other demands in a Dhaka industrial area. The repression is aimed at preventing a broader eruption by workers against the living and working conditions they face.

In the Ashulia industrial belt of Dhaka's Savar district, at least 1,600 workers have been sacked and around 1,500 sued, accused of "inciting" the agitation, "trespassing," "vandalism" and "theft." Most of the sued workers fear arrest at any time, preventing them from seeking employment at other factories.

Thirty workers and union leaders have been arrested already, with some remanded in custody. The Awami League (AL) government has used the Special Powers Act, a notorious military-era law, to detain them. Raids are being conducted throughout Ashulia, hunting for the sued workers, and arrest warrants have been sent to the police stations of their home districts.

Factory managements are using this state repression to intimidate workers in order to intensify their exploitation. In the factories on the outskirts of Dhaka, employers are forcing employees to work extra hours without any overtime payments. At IDS Group, the management threatened workers with arrest if they refused to work the extra hours.

The Ashulia workers' campaign started with a walkout at the Windy Group apparel factory on December 11, demanding a revision of the minimum wages. This provided a spark for other workers facing worsening conditions. Workers from about 25 apparel factories subsequently joined the strike, putting forward 16 demands, including a wage rise to 16,000 taka (\$US200) a month, from the present 5,300 taka. Ultimately, the striking workers' numbers swelled to

about 150,000, many of whom were on strike for 10 days.

Fearing that the strike would spread to other factories in Ashulia, apparel companies and authorities responded by locking out workers at about 85 factories. Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government deployed the police, Border Guard Bangladesh and the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) to suppress the growing protest. At least 10 workers were injured as police baton-charged and fired tear gas shells on the protesting workers.

When some 59 of the locked-out factories were reopened on December 26, most sacked dozens of workers. There was a clear indication of the government's collaboration in this witch-hunt. At a meeting with the garment employers earlier, state minister for labour Mujibul Haque threatened "stern action against those who instigated the workers in Ashulia and those who will be caught doing the same in future."

Further, Haque said the government and the employers were "gathering information from different sources to know the identities of the instigators." He branded the strike as "illegal" and "misconduct." In line with Haque, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) labelled the workers' agitation as a "conspiracy."

On December 23, police seized Ekushey Television journalist Nazmul Huda for allegedly inciting the unrest. He was accused of "inaccurate reporting" on the protests. A Dhaka court on December 27 remanded Huda for interrogation by the police.

Hasina's government is seeking to justify its repression by branding the workers' actions as a "conspiracy" instigated by outsiders and is also moving to use the workers' protests to silence its political

opponents.

On December 22, the Dhaka District Bangladesh National Party (BNP) president and former MP, Dr Dewan Mohammad Salahuddin Babu, was sued for “alleged involvement in the instigation of the workers for creating the recent RMG [ready-made garment] unrest.”

The anti-working class record of the BNP while in power, however, makes clear that this right-wing party is just as hostile to workers as the ruling AL.

Contrary to government’s allegations about outside “instigations,” the Ashulia garment workers’ struggle was triggered by their appalling conditions. The *New Age* on December 20 reported that workers complained that “prices of all essential goods increased by at least 100 percent but their wages [had] remained the same since 2013.”

Babul Hossain, an apparel worker, told the newspaper that the rent of a room had gone up by 1,000 Taka to 1,500 Taka, but workers received only a “five percent yearly increment on our basic salaries.”

The minimum wage of 5,300 taka a month, set through an agreement between the trade unions and the government in 2013 after massive apparel workers’ protests, in no way matches the skyrocketing prices for essentials. But even that meagre wage is not paid by many factory owners.

The strikes and protests of Ashulia garment workers developed outside the official trade unions, which were desperately trying to prevent such a movement. The actions broke out following the breakdown of talks between the BGMEA and unions on November 25.

Sramik Karmachari Federation (SKF) general secretary Arafat Jakaria Sonjoy told the *Dhaka Tribune*: “The factory closure is hurting both the workers and owners as well as the country’s economy. That is why, we urged the BGMEA to hold such meeting to resolve the deadlock.”

The SKF leader added: “I think there is no direct connection of organised trade unions and it was not a right decision to go on strike without placing the list of demands.”

The common fear of the government, employers and unions about the Ashulia workers’ campaign is underscored by the importance of the industrial belt for the country’s garment industry. The *Daily Star* reported on December 25: “Ashulia is known as a hub of more

than 350 ... garment factories. The contribution of the factories amounts to 20 percent of the total export of garment items of \$28 billion in the last fiscal year.”

The past few months have seen a growth of industrial action by Bangladesh workers. In October, about 600 employees of state-owned mobile operator Teletalk started an indefinite strike across the country, demanding a 100 percent increase in basic salaries.

In November, around 100 CNB Composite Ltd garment factory workers demonstrated in Ashulia, demanding the reopening of their factory, payment of wage arrears, and reversal of the sacking of 20 workers.

In December, several hundred Rezaul Apparels workers in Dhaka city protested, demanding payment of wages and compensation for the relocation of the factory. Workers at Burimari land port staged a two-day strike for a wage increase.

The Awami League government fears that any increase of wages would undercut the employers’ competitiveness with other apparel-producing countries. The country’s garment sector monthly wage—about \$US67 or 5,300 takas—is the lowest in the world and far less than \$112 per month in India and \$280 in China.

The government’s current budget has approved 46 special economic zones, and the government has vowed to establish a total of 100 zones in 15 years in order to attract more investment for the apparel sector. To maintain the lowest wages, Hasina’s administration is determined to keep the working class suppressed. This will further intensify the already explosive social and political situation.



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